



Often the best way to get to know a new city is through its food, exploring its fascinating culinary roots and vibrant market and restaurant scene.

Knowing just where to start can be daunting however, especially if you have just arrived from another country, do not speak the language very well and have no idea where the best districts are or who sells the most tempting regional products.

Jessica Hammer arrived in Toulouse, in Occitanie, south-west France, from America in 2017 with her husband, Peter, who is a dancer, choreographer and jazz and tap dance teacher. He acquired an artistic visa to come to France and had professional contacts in the city, which is why they chose to settle in *La Ville Rose*.

"This is our first time living long-term outside the United States," Jessica says. "It's something we've wanted to do since we got married."

"Several years ago, when we lived in Chicago, we were both at the point in our careers when we thought maybe now is the time to start thinking about it."

The couple, who are both 35 and have been married for 13 years, had always been interested in France.

On a trip to Paris a few years ago they learnt all about French wine and cheese which piqued Jessica's interest.

"I had been pursuing it as an interest

in my free time, going to a lot of wine tastings and having friends over for cheese dinners and reading all about it," she says.

"I decided to get a job in a cheese and wine shop and spent a year there, working behind the counter, selling wine and cheese. About half of the cheeses they sold were imported and half of those were French cheeses."

While working at the cheese shop in Chicago, Jessica and her husband started researching what visas might be available to enable them to move to France and were delighted to discover Peter's artistic work was eligible for a *pasport talent*.

"Before we submitted our visa application we visited to see if it was a place we'd like to live," Jessica recalls. "We both really enjoyed it, but I think we underestimated how much we would fall in love with Toulouse in particular."

#### NEW CHAPTER

Leaving one of America's largest cities for southern France did come as a cultural shock at first, however, especially the slower pace of life, but they have since become more accustomed to it.

"You are also allowed to take it a bit slower, so we really enjoy that here," says Jessica, who grew up on a blueberry farm in rural Michigan. "I enjoy winters here much more too."

The couple were able to find an apartment through a friend of a friend ▶

Above: Jessica (left) liaises with local producers  
Below: The impressive Place du Capitole



PHOTOS © JODI BODTJE; SERRNOVIK / GETTY IMAGES

# A matter of taste

American Jessica Hammer talks to *Lucy Parford* about running food tours to help people discover Toulouse's rich culinary heritage and produce

*“It’s part of the reason I wanted to start Taste of Toulouse, to give people the experience I wish I could have had when I first moved here”*

in the *quartier* of Minimes, a 20-minute walk from Place du Capitole, Toulouse’s magnificent main square.

Although Jessica was delighted to have so much fresh French produce on her doorstep, she struggled with shopping at first, as she couldn’t communicate easily with stallholders.

“My French when we first moved here was not that great and I so wanted to talk about the cheese, but I just couldn’t express myself in French yet,” explains Jessica, who went on to take intensive language classes with her husband soon after they arrived.

“With my love of cheese and wine and the knowledge I had, I really wanted to ask questions and I couldn’t because I hadn’t found anybody I could ask in English.

“It’s part of the reason I wanted to start Taste of Toulouse, to give people the experience I wish I could have had when I first moved here - to be able to learn about all of the amazing food and wine here, in my own language.”

Now Jessica’s English-speaking food tours, which she launched just over a year ago, inspire people to explore French cuisine and culture and give an insight into the lively local life in Toulouse. Her small group tours visit the city’s largest covered market, *Marché Victor Hugo*, stopping off at passionate local artisans who make and sell some of the best products in south-west France.

“I chose that one because it was my local market,” Jessica explains. “I had been going there regularly since we moved here and as my French continued to improve, I got to know the different vendors, asked them questions about their products and what they were doing and learnt about their stories.

“I was also doing a lot of research on my own about the legal aspect of food in France, whether the distinctions and names of a baguette or the AOC (*Appellation d’origine contrôlée*) and AOP (*Appellation d’origine protégée*) systems.”

Jessica also spent three months studying intensively to become a certified

French Wine Scholar expanding her knowledge of all the different French wine regions, the different production methods and terminology.

At their new French home, as her husband is a vegetarian, the pair enjoy cooking together with the wonderful seasonal produce which is available from the market.

“One thing I’ve really appreciated here, is so much more of an emphasis on cooking with the produce that’s in season,” Jessica says.

“In Chicago I was used to being able to go to the grocery store at any time of the year and get anything. But here you have to really focus a bit more on what’s actually in season.”

### MARKET DAYS

Their local covered market in Place Victor Hugo, which dates to 1892, is home to more than 70 specialist traders selling a wide range of products, as well as five restaurants which source their products from the market.

“It’s really cool,” Jessica enthuses. “We have all different kinds of butchers, everything from your basic beef, lamb and pork to a tripe butcher who does organ meat and offal.

“We have a lot of charcuterie vendors doing excellent charcuterie, several bakeries and pastry shops and foie gras producers, of course, from south-west France. We have seafood and *traiteurs*, which are prepared food vendors.

“It’s really fantastic and to me, what sets apart Victor Hugo from some of the other markets we have in the city, is that inside we have several cafés and wine bars where you can get a cup of coffee, or a drink, and hang out there.

“The atmosphere is great, it’s not just a place to go and do your shopping, it’s also very much a community gathering place.”

As Jessica’s family are farmers back in the US, she grew up with a close relationship to food, as well as the ins and outs of running a small business, which has paid dividends in her new venture. ▶



Pont Neuf bridge crosses the Garonne river in Toulouse



Time for cheese and wine tasting



Jessica visits one of her favourite sellers



A food tour group enjoys the market atmosphere



Jessica introduces visitors to the market

PHOTO © JODI BODTKE

When she first moved to Chicago she also worked for a Chamber of Commerce, liaising directly with all the small local businesses and overseeing marketing and events. “I was the tour guide for the neighbourhood,” she smiles. “When you’re working in such a small community like that, you realise how much people rely on you to be the pulse of what’s going on.”

“You quickly learn to always be looking at things with new eyes,” she adds. “I really loved working directly with all of those local businesses. It’s one of the things that has carried forward into my work now, heavily promoting how much local businesses are the heart and soul of the community.”

### FAVOURITE SHOPS

As well as the Victor Hugo Market Tour, Jessica also runs an afternoon Chocolate and Pastry Tour which takes in six of her favourite chocolate shops and *pâtisseries*

More online

[completefrance.com/  
regions-of-france](https://completefrance.com/regions-of-france)

Find out more about Toulouse and Occitanie in our region guide

COMPLETE  
FRANCE

*“When you’re working in such a small community like that, you realise how much people rely on you to be the pulse of what’s going on”*

around Toulouse city centre.

During the summer she runs between five and eight tours a week. Some of her customers have just moved to Toulouse and want to come and find out how you shop for food at the local market or others have lived in the city for a while and want something fun to do with their visitors. They are generally a mix of Americans, Britons, Australians, Irish and other European nationalities.

Jessica says: “I’ve got a great relationship with the tourism office here. They have been really fantastic and hugely supportive of my business venture. They

saw that I was really serious about bringing English speakers into the gastronomic fold.”

When Jessica isn’t busy working, she likes to spend her afternoons in St-Cyprien on Toulouse’s Left Bank.

“It’s got one of the most beautiful parks in the city, right along the Garonne river,” she says. “It’s just a gorgeous place to picnic, you see people there playing *pétanque* and enjoying the afternoon with their dogs.

“There are great bars and restaurants nearby and one of my favourite chocolate shops is in St-Cyprien. There’s also a cute museum, a vintage picture museum, called the Musée de l’affiche de Toulouse.

“There are a lot of great things on that side of the river, but tourists don’t always go there because it’s not directly in the city centre.”

Jessica and Peter will have to renew their visas, but their hearts are set on remaining in France as long as they can.

“We are hoping to be here for the foreseeable future,” Jessica says. “We love living here and Toulouse is a place that feels like home to me.” **LF**

[tasteoftoulouse.com](https://tasteoftoulouse.com)